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Precarity in the ivory cage: Neoliberalism and casualisation of work in the Irish higher education sector

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Abstract

The higher education sector in Ireland has undergone major changes under the effect of neoliberalism including severe budget cuts, transfer of research funding to external agencies, reduction in permanent contracts and increased reliance on part-time, temporary staff for teaching and research roles. The neoliberalisation of the university, as in other countries, has dramatically changed the nature of work undertaken on behalf of the institution. Permanent jobs increasingly disappear in favour of low-paid, temporary employment. Such work comes without security, proper remuneration or benefits, and renders invisible the precarious workers whose labour the university relies on to function.

Based on the results of an outreach project on casual academic labour practices, this paper reports on the discernible patterns in the work of the precariat in Irish higher education. Our results indicate that casualisation in the Irish context is systemic, gendered, and not the preserve of junior academics. We also suggest it predates austerity and has become so endemic that there are now few exit points out of precarious work and as such, many are now trapped in a hamster wheel of precarity.

Keywords: *Higher Education; Casualisation; Neoliberalism; Ireland; Academic work; Gender inequality in higher education.*

Introduction

In Europe and elsewhere, the promotion of the ‘knowledge economy’ has accelerated and legitimised the implementation of neoliberal policy to higher education. Neoliberalism imposes the view that education is a commodity individuals should purchase for their own benefit (Bruno, Laval and Clément, 2010; Davies, Gottsche and Bansel, 2006; Saunders, 2008; Washburn, 2003) and universities increasingly behave as corporations (Slaughter and

Rhoades, 2000). Competitiveness, performance and profitability become hegemonic values pervading higher education institutions and thoroughly transforming the way they operate (Aronowitz, 2000; Clarke, 2012; Giroux, 2007). While the massification of higher education led to a dramatic increase in student numbers, public funding of the sector has plummeted, increasing the reliance on private sources of funding and uncertainty as to future cash-flows. This in turn has increased the need for flexible and cheap labour (Hill, 2005; Ryan et al., 2013).

Changes in the structure and sources of funding for research have also affected the nature of academic roles, leading to a proliferation of short-term research-only and teaching-only positions in line with short-term productivity agendas (PECRES, 2011). Graduate teaching has been unofficially redefined from traineeship and entry-level employment to cheap, short-term labour (Bousquet, 2002). Thus, permanent academic positions increasingly disappear in favour of low-paid, temporary employment. This restructuring of academic work has resulted in the burgeoning of a particular type of academic worker, the casual academic. Casual academics are individuals employed in higher education institutions on a short-term and/or part-time (including zero-hour) basis and who do not enjoy standard employment protection. They are typically referred to as ‘adjuncts’ or ‘contingents’ in the US, ‘fractionals’ in the UK or ‘sessionals’ (a term preferred in Australia and Canada). Their work falls in the category of precarious labour, a category of work typically defined by low pay, irregularity, uncertainty, lack of security, limited social and workplace protection and benefits including trade union representation (ILO, 2012, p. 27). This academic precariat are marginalised and often hidden from view, their profile as highly educated and seeking work in a sector that is typically one of the most elite in society does not reflect that of the typical precarious worker, at least on the surface.

Yet the casualisation of academic labour parallels a broader pattern of casualisation found across a variety of sectors (ILO, 2012). Thus, in Australia, the rate of casual employment is twice as high in higher education than it is in other sectors of the economy, with over 50% of the teaching load performed by casual workers (Ryan et al., 2013), while in the UK, British higher education institutions use more zero-hour contracts than other sectors (Butler, 2013). The pervasive ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) and the nature of precarious work itself isolate workers and often prevent them from formulating the issues affecting them as structural rather than as the product of individual failures or weaknesses. In this context,

casualisation is both a consequence and an instrument of neoliberalisation, making resistance difficult and paving the way for a complete reorganisation of the sector along managerial, neoliberal lines.

With notable exceptions, the bulk of the academic literature on academic precarity does not challenge or name the structural inequalities and injustice inherent to the system. Instead some research focuses on enhancing casual workers' compliance and efficiency or at best, their working conditions (Smith and Coombe, 2006; Umbach, 2007; Kezar, 2013 and many more). Other studies of the academic workplace focus on gender (Armenti, 2004; Bagilhole, 1993; Probert, 2005) and racial inequality (Baez, 2002) or the intersection of both (Davis et al., 2011; Turner, 2002) but these are rarely problematised in relation to casual employment and/or neoliberalism; again with notable exceptions which highlight the extreme vulnerability of historically marginalised groups in the academic workplace (Aziz, 1990; Bernstein et al., 2001; Reay, 2004; Nikunen, 2012; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Other scholarly research documents the degradation of working and living conditions of casual workers and speaks of segmentation, exploitation and marginalisation (Bauder, 2006; Bernstein et al., 2001; Hess, 2004; Hill, 2005; McAlpine, 2010; Nikunen, 2012; Ryan et al., 2013; Tweenen and Hantke, 2007). Beyond academic literature, casual academics have been organising around the issues affecting them through groups and campaigns such as *The New Faculty Majority*, *Adjunct Action*, *COCAL* in the US; or the U.C.U. 'Stamp Out Casual Contract' Campaign, and *Fractionals for Fair Pay* in the U.K.

In Ireland, the higher education sector has also undergone drastic transformations under neoliberalism, seeing the emergence of 'corporate universities' focused on servicing the private sector (Allen, 2007) and generating revenue from international students (Khoo, 2011). New managerialism, the governing model through which market principles are extended to the public sector, has fundamentally altered the values, core mission and operation of universities (Gallagher, 2013; Garvin, 2012; Lolich, 2011; Lynch, Crean and Moran, 2010; Holborow, 2012). Specific issues of gender discrimination emerged in the promotion process, which were deemed so serious that various studies were commissioned (Coate and Kandiko Howson, 2014; Equality Officer, 2009; Lynch et al., 2012; O'Grada et al., 2012). While some of these analyses explore the changes in work and recruitment practices in the neoliberal university, the issues of casualisation and the working and living conditions of casual academic staff have been largely sidelined. This article is an attempt to rectify this omission and is based on the results of an online questionnaire aimed at precarious higher education

workers. As such, this is the first significant study of casual academic staff in Ireland. These findings show that the neoliberalisation of Irish higher education has had effects similar to those observed in other national contexts, creating an army of underpaid, vulnerable ‘second-class citizens’ (Gappa and Leslie, 1993) with little or no opportunity for career progression and that casualisation has exacerbated existing gender inequalities and unequal power relations, contradicting the meritocratic ideals universities promote. Our broader aim is to contribute to the debate on the impact of neoliberalism on higher education internationally, by focusing on a country perceived as the poster-child of neoliberalism in Europe.

Neoliberalism and casualisation in the Irish third-level sector

Irish economic policy has long been neoliberal in nature (O’Hearn, 1998) but neoliberalism progressed at an accelerated pace throughout the 1990s and 2000s and took a new impetus after the 2007 economic crisis (Mooney Simmie, 2012). The bank bailouts and subsequent International Monetary Fund input into Irish fiscal policy brought the introduction of harsh austerity measures, which curtailed public service spending and were accompanied by mass wage cuts and redundancies. The result is a staggering youth unemployment rate, not helped by cuts to student grants, and the return of mass immigration as an answer to joblessness.

The promotion of the ‘knowledge economy’ at European level has accelerated and legitimated the implementation of neoliberal policy to the third-level education system. In 2000, with the objective of making Europe a world leader in the ‘knowledge economy’, the council of Lisbon turned education into a cornerstone of its economic strategy. Education was then allocated an economic value and envisaged as an investment, valuable only for its role in building ‘human capital’ and profitability as well as for facilitating technological innovation – it was no longer valued for its role in building an equal society or in the transmission of culture. The language of competitiveness and flexibility characterised all the texts and speeches emanating from the various meetings building ‘the Lisbon strategy’. Universities had to train future workers to adapt to the demands of a flexible labour market; they also had to be competitive on the global education market. The increasing influence of global university tables – in particular the Shanghai table which appeared in 2003 – fuelled this move towards competitiveness and justified the implementation of performance monitoring, auditing, benchmarking and other evaluation methods imported from management, whose values are greatly at odds with the core mission of education (Bruno, Laval and Clément, 2010).

In higher education, neoliberal policies are channelled through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), which advocates 'greater freedom to innovate, with more customised employment relationships for those higher education institutions which progress towards a more entrepreneurial and autonomous model of operation' (HEA, 2011a, p. 118). In 2009, a freeze was imposed on public sector recruitment (Oireachtas, 2009) and in 2011 a reduction of 3,300 public sector posts per year was initiated (HEA, 2011b). Severe pay cuts were imposed on both occasions, while traditionally low union participation rates meant that the higher education sector was particularly vulnerable and opposed little resistance (Lynch et al., 2012). Per capita spending on higher education declined sharply between 2006 and 2012 despite a projected increase of 20% in student enrolments (DES, 2013). As a result, the staff-student ratio increased from 1:15 to 1:19 in five years and is now above the OECD average (HEA, 2013) while other sources claim that if non-academic staff are taken out of the equation, the ratio is then 1:16.8 in Institutes of Technology and 1:26 in universities (Loxley 2014, p.129). It has also been suggested that the official ratio may include casual staff including graduate students (Garvin, 2012), although the HEA does not provide sufficient information on staff contracts to confirm this.

In parallel, the number of managers has increased steadily, Irish higher education institutions now employing more non-academic than academic staff (HEA, 2012, p. 110). The chief executive of the HEA commented that this 'enhanced performance of the higher education sector has been very impressive as universities catered for more students at a cheaper cost (Irish Universities Association, 2011; HEA, 2011b). In the meanwhile, in line with neoliberal policies, Irish universities spend lavishly on re-branding, promotional world tours, new sport facilities, bonuses for their top managers and legal fees. In practice this 'rationalisation' meant an increase in the use of temporary academic staff as well as a degradation of working conditions affecting all academic staff. The Public Services Stability Agreement 2013-16, or *Haddington Road Agreement* as it is commonly referred, added two extra hours to the working week for all public sector workers. The salaries of permanent workers were also subject to a freeze on increments. While cuts to pay were imposed uniformly across the public sector, this had sharper consequences for those on lower wages. Additional pay cuts were implemented locally by way of redefining tasks and this particularly affected graduate workers. Retired or permanent staff members on leave were routinely replaced with hourly-paid lecturers instead of lecturers on full-time temporary contracts. In 2011, JobBridge, a

state-supported internship scheme, was introduced. Unemployed individuals can be hired through JobBridge at no cost to the employer, while the individual receives a weekly €50 in addition to their unemployment benefit, bringing their income to €250 a week. Irish third-level institutions use the scheme widely to fill all types of full-time positions, including librarians, student counsellors and research positions. For its part, the blossoming for-profit higher education sector implemented questionable practices such as redefining employees as self-employed contractors, thus denying them statutory entitlements.

Yet the extent and impact of casualisation have not been documented. While it emerged that nearly a third of second-level teachers were employed on casual contracts (www.unite4education.org), there is little data in the public domain on the third-level sector beyond statistics, which simply identify the overall number employed in Irish higher education. Based on available figures, a recent article claims that in 2013, 68 part-time academics and presumably no casual academics were employed across the 7 Irish universities (Loxley 2014, p. 128). The official figure for part-time employees emanating from one single medium-sized university is 50 in the same year, and is considered a gross underestimation (Rabbitts, 2014). Since 2013 the statistics produced by the HEA no longer distinguish between temporary and permanent full-time academic staff. There are no data on the amount of contact hours taught by temporary hourly-paid workers including graduate students. Only the proportion of researchers on temporary contracts is officially known; it currently stands at 80% (Loxley, 2014, p.128-129). In line with this, the existence of precarious workers is completely erased from official reports. On the rare occasions where non-permanent academics are mentioned (e.g. HEA, 2011c, p. 18; DES, 2011, p. 67), they are described as an imperfect but necessary commodity and no attention is paid to their working or living conditions. Attempts at obtaining such information from universities have so far proven unsuccessful, a difficulty encountered in other national contexts (PECRES 2011). Complicated by the many shapes and forms taken by precarity in higher education under the proliferation of non-standardised contracts and the lack of transparency in recruitment processes for such work. In this context, the present study is the first, which explores both the objective conditions and subjective experiences of casual academic workers in Ireland.

Background to the study

There have been small-scale challenges to the erosion of pay and working conditions in Irish higher education but these failed to develop into a broader movement. Features of precarious

work, which include fragmentation, isolation, fear and lack of resources, make it difficult to organise. It is in such a context that Third Level Workplace Watch was established in 2013 as a collective of precarious higher education workers. It grew out of personal struggles of its members with unfair pay and working conditions, unemployment, illegal redundancies and a growing sense of insecurity, anxiety and demoralisation palpable among friends and colleagues. It soon became evident that the lack of data on casualisation, the shape it takes across institutions and its effect on working conditions made it difficult to articulate demands for change.

We designed an outreach project, which consisted of gathering information from casual academics on their current and former working conditions in order to inform the campaign of the collective. The questionnaire was designed as an outreach exercise and loosely adapted from the framework used by the PECRES study group in France (2011). Its purpose was primarily as an organising tool and not a pure social scientific exercise. Nevertheless, our research is firmly located within the well-established, social movement-friendly tradition of Participatory Action Research (PAR). At the core of this approach is the production of knowledge by social movements through reflexive practice.

Morrell (2009) identified a number of ways in which research can be done under the rubric of PAR, two of which are befitting our work. These are, firstly, the productive of alternative knowledge or content, a knowledge for and by social movements; and secondly, the use of research to network and build relationships. As an exercise in PAR, our research is carried out by and on precarious workers organising to change their material conditions. We see our work as movement praxis-part of a cyclical process of praxis whereby theory, action, reflection are informed by each other. (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kindon et al, 2007; hooks, 1984). We are also generating knowledge on our unequal working conditions as a means of building solidarity with other precarious workers and to reach out to those who see their working conditions as individual, not systemic. This research is an organising tool insofar as it allowed us to connect with over 200 precarious workers in academia. We have used this to build relationships, foster further information sharing, and also as a springboard for action, to ask 'what is to be done?' (Barker and Cox, 2002, p.25).

Casual academic work in Ireland varies widely within and across institutions, making it difficult to develop conceptual categories of relevance. Conditions vary between the plethora

of contract types: while some in the temporary full-time category have multiple-year contracts, others have rolling one-year or 9-month contracts. Often institutions do not have standardised rates of pay for new, temporary contracts and so in some cases there are large discrepancies between the salaries of two people in the same department doing similar work as universities tie temporary posts to available budgets. Many are hourly-paid or paid per course or even per day; corrections and consultation may or may not be paid and hourly-rates of pay for both lecturers and graduate workers ('teaching assistants' or 'tutors') vary from simple to double from one college to another and discrepancies exist for similar work both across and within departments.

We used a mixture of closed and open-ended questions to elicit information on the respondents' subject area, type of work contract, rate of pay, age, gender and time spent working in the sector. We specifically used an open-ended question to ask about rates of pay as we suspected (correctly) that there was no easy way to devise categories that were mutually exclusive due to the lack of standardisation around pay. The last three questions were open-ended and concerned respondents' general experience of working in the sector; perception of their future prospects and further comments.

As our hope was to reach casual workers beyond traditional structures (departmental and trade union memberships), we embarked on an aggressive social media campaign through which we circulated the questionnaire. It was also circulated via email with the help of a national trade union for academics. The questionnaire was addressed explicitly to those identifying as precarious workers and received 227 responses. The anonymity of the questionnaire and our identification as precarious workers allowed us to collect very detailed and personal accounts of the lived experience of precarity. Through these responses we gained an understanding of respondents' subjective perceptions of their experience, while the information collected on income, age and time spent in the sector helped us to understand their objective conditions. When we look at their pay, working conditions and insecurity the basis for such descriptions become apparent.

The academic precariat in Ireland

Profile of respondents

Despite the lack of systematic sampling, the range of participants in the study indicates a healthy diversity, particularly across the categories of age, gender and institution, although it

must be noted that the institutes of technology, the private for-profit sector and the scientific and medical disciplines were under-represented. Figure 1 provides an overview of the profile of respondents to our online questionnaire. Most of the respondents were female (142, 63%) while 81 (36%) were male and 4 did not specify their gender. We feel this reflects the gender hierarchies within the Irish third-level sector where men are concentrated at the middle and top of the academic ranks while women are more likely to be found lower down on the scale (Lynch *et al.* 2012). As such, the gender imbalance in our study is reflective of a wider, structural gender difference.

Figure1. Profile of Respondents

Gender	N	%
Female	142	63
Male	81	36
Employment status	N	%
FT-Perm	45	22
Casual	153	73
Unemployed	11	5
Discipline	N	%
Social Sciences	56	25
Arts & Hum	120	53
Sciences & Eng.	36	16
Mixed/other	5	2
Non-academic/ unknown	10	4

Of the 227 respondents, 220 identified as academics and of these 45 (22%) identified as permanent full-time academic staff members and 153 (73%) as casual academic workers. 11 (5%) reported being unemployed and seeking work in the sector. Although the questionnaire was designed with precarious workers in mind, responses from permanent members of staff gave us the opportunity to compare the situations of permanent and casual workers, particularly in relation to career and salary progression.

The Arts and Humanities was identified as the home discipline for the majority of respondents (120, 53%), followed by Social Sciences (56, 25%), while 36 respondents (16%) indicated they worked in Science and Engineering. This over-representation of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences reflects our distribution methods, which relied initially on our own networks as social scientists. It may also reflect the fact that in the neoliberal university, disciplines associated with the production and sharing of critical intellectual knowledge are increasingly marginalised in favour of others more likely to meet the need of

corporations and the ‘knowledge economy’ (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Giroux, 2014). As a result, the Humanities and Social Sciences often bear the brunt of funding cuts and tend to be the most affected by casualisation (PECRES 2011). Finally, 4% of our sample (10) identified as either non-academic or did not specify their discipline. This category also includes those who left academia after an unsuccessful pursuit for secure work. Together with the unemployed and those who have moved abroad, this group is invisible and particularly hard to reach. Our figures are not indicative in any way of the proportion of third-level academic workers affected by emigration or unemployment.

Types of Casual labour

Academics perform casual labour in a myriad of ways, each of which has differing levels of exploitation. Figure 2 illustrates the different types of casual work engaged in by our respondents.

Figure 2. Types of Casual Academic Labour Performed

Contract type	N	%
Full-time, temporary	43	28
Hourly paid, temporary	69	45
Mixed Casual	7	5
Pro-rata	16	10
Other casual	18	12
Total	153	100

Those academics are employed on various types of casual contracts, which include temporary fulltime; temporary part-time pro-rata; temporary part-time hourly-paid (referred to as ‘hourly paid’) and combinations of various types of casual contracts (‘mixed’). We created the ‘other casual’ category to describe unusual types of contracts (e.g. forced self-employment) and postgraduate students doing hourly-paid work. While we argue with Bousquet (2002) that these should be considered as workers not students, they are not assumed to be presently looking for full-time employment, which is why there are in a separate category from their ‘hourly-paid’ colleagues for the purpose of this study.

Casual academics as working poor

A marked difference emerged between permanent and casual workers in terms of income. Figure 3 compares the reported annual income of permanent workers, casual workers as a whole, and then separating out hourly-paid workers.

Figure 3. Salary and Current Employment Status

Salary (euro)	Full-time Permanent (%)	Casual (%)	Hourly-Paid
<10K	0	46	77
10-15K	0	7	8
16-20K	0	7	8
21-25K	0	6	2
26-30K	0	6	3
31-35K	5	7	2
36-40K	7	6	0
41-50k	9	7	2
51-70K	16	6	0
>70K	64	1	0
Total	100	100	100

46% of casual workers report salaries below €10,000 per year, which is below the poverty threshold in Ireland. In total 66% of casual workers earn less than the average industrial wage (CSO, 2014).

This pattern of unjust remuneration is exacerbated when one differentiates between those paid on contract and those paid on a pro-rata and hourly basis. Only 7% in the hourly-paid category reported earning over €25,000, namely over the average industrial wage. 77% of hourly-paid workers are below the poverty threshold. Our 69 hourly-paid respondents are fully qualified lecturers with years of experience in the sector. Several of these stated that they worked full timetables but the hourly rates of pay (on average 40-60 euro an hour for lecturers) do not reflect the amount of time required to effectively teach in higher education. One respondent thus reported feeling ‘exhausted; underpaid and overworked; [it] feels like [I] am working full-time with associated responsibilities to students but only paid for two days’. She is one of many relying on social welfare to make ends meet. She also fears being forced to sign off these Jobseekers payments as her workload makes it impossible to meet social welfare appointments.

Another respondent expressed a mixture of frustration, exhaustion and worry over her working conditions:

Money worries are a constant preoccupation and source of continual unease. It is exhausting. I feel a good deal of resentment regarding the fact that I have been kept in virtual poverty by employment laws that allow for underpayment, late payment and the provision of

extraordinarily unfair working terms to lecturers. Adjunct is just another word for exploitation.

These concerns are not atypical. Our research indicates that a number of respondents juggle hourly-paid work between several institutions and often float in and out of employment, drawing social welfare or relying on the support of others.

Temporary academic staff are now seasonal workers, with unemployment a likely scenario in the summer months. A number of respondents took the opportunity to express concerns over their ability to sustain themselves and eek out a living wage. Several reported not being able to afford childcare, rent and medical expenses, being ‘exhausted’ by continuous ‘money worries’ or having ‘sleepless nights trying to figure out how to pay bills’. Not only is hourly-paid work unstable and poorly remunerated, but also it is typically paid several weeks or months after the work has been performed. One woman stated that she was ‘frequently left without any income for months on end for reasons of administrative convenience’. In addition, hourly-paid workers are not entitled to sick, compassionate or maternity leave.

Although this status comes under the category of part-time work, most of these workers did not choose to work part-time as several indicated that they combined their pro-rata contract with other university work or with work outside the sector. One male respondent reported working shifts in a factory in order to support his family, in spite of being a fully qualified academic with 14 years’ experience in the sector. As noted in the PECRES report (2011), the official rhetoric promotes short-term and/or part-time work as beneficial to the employee in terms of higher pay, privileged working conditions and flexible working conditions. With the exception of some graduate students, none of our respondents viewed their part-time and/or short-term employment as desired, financially viable or flexible arrangements.

It should also be noted that in terms of rates of pay a number of respondents added ‘I think’ or ‘I hope’ or question marks to their responses, suggesting they started work without having a clear idea of how much they were getting paid. Another characteristic of the sector is that any type of work is welcome and that there is no space for workers to negotiate their working conditions. Given the increase in competition, young academics are keen to take on work which they hope will add to their experience, making them employable in the future, while those primarily struggling to make ends meet end up accepting anything.

The unemployed and those working in other sectors

While many respondents indicate that they consider looking for work out of the sector and/or abroad due to the scarcity of stable positions and the unsatisfactory working conditions, it has become a reality for a number of respondents. Emigration does not necessarily alleviate problems as those respondents who moved to the UK report similar precarious working conditions and low pay. Those working outside the sector are generally satisfied with their career move despite all their time and effort invested in the third-level sector. It appears clearly from their accounts that it is the precarity and low pay characteristic of the sector, which motivated their decision.

Of the eleven unemployed, six had worked in the third-level sector for five years or more. One respondent completed that they are now unemployed after a total of 13 years spent in the sector. Another participant described 7 years of strenuous work between various institutions and how she continuously fought to maintain a sustainable number of hours from one term to the next, only to end up unemployed with no further prospects.

Gender disparities

Our data shows a marked gender difference in both the concentration of women in temporary work and the length of time they are trapped in temporary work. Only 15% of the female academics in our sample identified as permanent full-time. 34% of the women in our sample reported being hourly-paid. Figure 4 illustrates the gender disparity in types of contract in our sample.

Figure 4. Current Employment Status and Gender

Employment Status	F (%)	M (%)
FT-Perm	15	30
FT-Temp	17	23
Hourly paid	34	25
Mixed Casual	4	1
Non-academic	7	5
Other casual	7	9
Pro-rata	10	2
Unemployed	5	5
Total	(140 N) 100%	(81N) 100%

The gender discrepancy becomes more visible towards the lower end of the status hierarchy, with women concentrated in hourly-paid and pro-rata work, the most precarious of the forms of casual labour identified in our sample. Several respondents specifically identified gender discrimination as a barrier to career progression, in line with findings from other studies in Ireland (e.g. Coate and Howson, 2014), where it should be noted that women make up 18% of those at professorial rank (HEA, 2013). One respondent noted that in her department, all the men secured pro-rata contracts while all the women remained hourly-paid for similar work. Several women reported they had taken or were about to take cases to the Labour Court. In addition, one respondent highlighted the issue of sexual harassment of female contract researchers in the academic workplace. Available research suggests academic environments are highly patriarchal and hetero-normative and even more so in the managerial university (Probert, 2005; Reay, 2004; Lynch et al., 2012; O'Connor, 2014). The legal vulnerability of casual workers leaves them unprotected from gender-based discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

The hamster wheel of precarious work

It is often suggested that differences in pay and statuses in the university are a matter of experience or performance. Casual academics, often optimistically referred to as 'early-career' academics, are encouraged to perform low-paid or free work in the hope to accumulate experience, develop a research profile and eventually secure a permanent contract. Yet, the average age of our sample is 39 with only 19% of respondents in their twenties. This suggests those engaged in precarious work are not just freshly minted PhDs. Many respondents in our sample report having worked in the third-level sector for long periods of time. It is significant that older workers are stuck in precarious, unstable work at this stage in their lives and that precarity is not the preserve of the young as we are often led to believe.

This is substantiated when we compare the salaries of permanent and casual staff that have been working in academia for five years or more with a significant gap emerging. At first glance one might be tempted to assume that pay is commensurate with experience thus explaining the income differentiation. However, differences in pay are clearly visible at the same level of experience between the two categories. Thus, while the temporary worker gains more experience over time the income does not change to reflect this.

Casual workers have been working an average of 7.2 years in higher education. Of these, the most startling finding is that hourly-paid workers are more likely to have worked in academia for on average of 5 years, all of whom bar one respondent reported an income of less than 10,000 euros a year. Those on mixed contracts reported an average of 10 years duration performing academic labour, followed by 8 years for pro-rata workers. Several of our respondents had worked over 10 years in higher education and continue to do so on a casual basis. One woman in her late forties described herself as 'a highly experienced and respected researcher' who despite this had only ever worked under short-term contracts, while another had spent 40 plus years as a casual academic. This suggests there is no guarantee for precarious workers that by continuing to work in the sector, they will eventually be rewarded by a permanent contract, or even be able to remain employed in higher education. The length of time spent as a precarious worker is indicative of more than just an increase in a reliance on temporary work by higher education institutions. This extension of precarity speaks to the difficulties experienced by temporary workers as they try obtain maintain a holistic academic profile that includes research, networking, and other facets of scholarly work.

Casual workers carry the teaching burden of departments, as they are more likely to be saddled with core modules, which inevitably bring more work through increased class-size. They rarely have the opportunity to teach the same course year after year, meaning that the time spent on preparation can hardly be reduced from one year to the next. This means casual workers are forced to prepare new material, often for free, while having little time to strengthen their expertise in modules related to their research areas and no scope to develop a research profile under the rubric of paid work. Teaching hours can also be drastically reduced from one term to the next with little or no notice, as has happened to several participants in our study, with catastrophic financial consequences. These precarious workers are also often excluded from applying to research or conference funding - the very things, which the myth of meritocracy promises are necessary to reap the reward of permanency. This further marginalises precarious workers and prevents them from engaging in research. Instead, they are often forced to take hourly-paid work on the research projects of others and not given academic credit for the work they do. This creates a situation whereby temporary workers are caught in a cyclical process, trapped in precarity, with diminishing exit points into secure academic work. Several participants pointed to the difficulties of balancing research and teaching, as institutions are increasingly defining the latter as extraneous work as temporary lecturing positions are being literally interpreted as such.

Precarity also isolates temporary workers, as they are often defined as outside department staff complements. One respondent explained: ‘And it is seen as so temporary that departments do not see you as their colleagues.’ Another stated: ‘Colleagues don’t feel the need to greet you’. As summed up by another, ‘It is not just about money. It is about treating hourly-paid workers as colleagues, providing support, including them in meetings, treating them with respect’. Any benefits of collegiality are also denied to precarious workers, further marginalising them from academic networks. The detrimental impact of ‘academic capitalism’ on collegiality (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997) is thus amplified for precarious workers. On a side note, our data indicates clearly that casualisation is not just a consequence of recent policy changes, as many in our sample started their careers as low-cost, disposable employees 10, 15 or over 20 years ago, and in one case earning less than 10,000 euros after 40 years of working in the sector.

Insecurity and the race to the bottom

The bulk of respondents who answered the last open-ended question wrote often substantial accounts of their distressing professional situations. Many casual workers encapsulated how they felt about their situation with negative descriptors like: ‘depressed’, ‘frustrated’, ‘worried’, ‘despondent and hopeless’, ‘disillusioned’, ‘demoralised and not looking forward to future’, and ‘exploited’. Some spoke of fear and isolation; others thanked us for ‘opening a forum’ and giving them a chance to speak. Feelings of job satisfaction were very rarely expressed and if so were expressed mostly by permanent lecturers – and again, mitigated this appreciation with negative statements in relation to workload increase, lack of acknowledgment, lack of promotional prospects and/or the colonisation of the sector by the managerial strategies and ethos. Even for those holding permanent posts, the promotion system is described as unjust or, as our respondents put it, sexist, ‘antiquated’ or simply ‘a cruel joke’.

Relatively positive or at least hopeful perceptions of future prospects were expressed by some graduate employees as well as by some relatively young workers who had secured their first temporary full-time contract but overall, perceptions were despondent or frankly negative. This indicates a pattern similar to that noted in the PECRES report in France (2011): while landing a first short-term contract may initially fuel hopes, these hopes are progressively discouraged as casual workers accumulate part-time, short-term contracts and realise that their careers are stagnating or worse deteriorating. The race to the bottom in higher education

is exemplified by the fact that those on temporary contract often stated they felt 'privileged' or 'lucky' to have a temporary but full-time position or scholarship. A striking illustration of just how low the bar is set for many precarious workers is their delight with having low-paid, temporary work as opposed to other worse but increasingly more likely options. Yet the realities of the academic workplace have also caught up with many younger workers, including graduate students/workers. 'Most PhD graduates I know are unemployed, working at low paid jobs unconnected to their PhDs or living a precarious existence trying to make up enough lecture hours in different colleges to cover bills', one writes; while another states 'there is no future for me in the university'. Another views recent graduates like himself as 'liabilities to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible' for his university, thus echoing Bousquet's (2002) 'waste product' theory, according to which universities use graduate workers as cheap labour and disposes of them as soon as they graduate, never to employ them again.

Unsurprisingly, those who had experienced precarious work over a number of years and between various institutions were the most likely to express anger and discouragement. Many spoke of exploitation, describing themselves as 'a cheap resource that the college thinks it can use and abuse' or as 'modern-day serfs'. Several reported taking cases to the Labour Court against their institutions and one respondent reported that her employment was terminated after she sought a contract of indefinite duration (CID) in the institution where she had been employed for a number of years, which illustrates the legal vulnerability of casual workers, unmitigated by their experience, performance and commitment. The picture which emerges is one of a highly hierarchical system ('a pyramid scheme' as one respondent commented) with little scope for upward mobility and instead the constant fear of being downgraded to the lower level – which many respondents have already experienced as their status, pay and conditions deteriorated over the years. Several complained they were exploited not only by the institution, but by their permanent colleagues ('I do their donkey work') or at best, that their colleagues 'cannot relate to or are not aware of situations of part-time, hourly-paid or contract workers'. Many resented the fact they performed similar work to that of permanent staff for a fraction of their income. These sentiments, as well as exploitative practices that inevitably develop in hierarchical structures, compound the objective pay gap and make it difficult to envisage third-level workers as a united group prepared to defend their working conditions collectively. As noted by Nikolaidis and Maroudas (2013) in the Greek case, the differentiation between permanent and casual

academics undermines the cohesion of the academic community significantly and makes it less able to resist the neoliberalisation of the sector and the deterioration of working conditions across the sector.

Several envisaged administrative work as a possible shelter from the on-going pauperisation of the sector but overall, those who expressed their wish to abandon their academic careers mentioned they felt limited in their choices as there were ‘no jobs elsewhere’. One in particular felt ‘like a prisoner’. Under such circumstances it is perhaps unsurprising that precarious workers feel too vulnerable to speak (‘We’re so busy trying to keep the boat afloat that we’re too scared to rock it’) and tolerate unfair treatment for fear of losing what they have: ‘I’ve tolerated things in [the workplace] I’d never have normally, in the hopes of career progress’. For casual workers, academe is no longer an ‘ivory tower’; it is more akin to an ‘ivory cage’ (Haiven, 2014). Some responses gave a clear indication of a feeling of worthlessness, of being a failure or a burden to one’s family. A few respondents considered their time spent in academia as a waste of time (‘I wish I could have my four years of PhD research back’) or worse, they viewed it as having irretrievably destroyed their chances of achieving a decent standard of living or their personal life goals.

Conclusion

The situation in the Irish third-level workplace appears no better from reports on the working conditions in other locations (Australia: Ryan et al. 2013; Canada: Bauder, 2006; Mysyk 2001; the U.S: Berry 2005, Bousquet, 2002; the U.K: Shelton et al., 2011; and others). Our findings are consistent with trends identified in other jurisdictions similarly affected by neoliberal policies. Until more wide-scale research is complete, however, it is difficult to determine where Ireland lies in the race to the bottom in higher education workplace practices.

This article is significant as a first step in addressing the lack of data on the extent and consequences of the casualisation of labour in the Irish higher education sector. While it may not be statistically significant, the results paint a picture consistent with our personal experiences, the informal conversations we have had with friends and colleagues over the years, and our discussions with other precarious workers. As such it constitutes an important step in a process necessary to analyse the impact of neoliberalism on academics’ working conditions and ultimately on education.

Our study documents the impact of casualisation of workers' morale and quality of life. It indicates a substantial amount of fully-qualified, experienced lecturers receive less than the minimum wage, that these are more likely to be women, and that time spent in the sector does not result in an improvement of conditions – in fact for many, conditions deteriorate over time and workers remain trapped in precarious, low-paid employment.

It must be noted that our study only uncovers a thin layer of the precarious experience and its impact on the well-being, relationships and health of those concerned. Qualitative research based on in-depth interviews is needed to reveal the full extent of the detrimental effects of precarity on this burgeoning group of workers. In the meantime, we hope that our initiative will help liberate precarious workers from the isolation and the seal of secrecy and shame as we position our circumstances and experiences as part of broader structural phenomena. We also acknowledge that the consequences of casualisation extend beyond the workers it directly affects. Our working conditions are the learning conditions of our students. What is the impact on equality in education of a system where students who need the most support are taught by precarious workers, whose own working conditions make it impossible to adequately support students? How can the foundational principles of higher education, like academic freedom and intellectual integrity remain intact under a system that denies a large portion of its workers the protection offered to permanent staff regarding their work?

Universities have always been hierarchical, gendered and racialised (Lynch et al., 2010; Reay, 2004) and exploitative practices are not a new phenomenon in academe. But casualisation is becoming normalised as a result of deliberate policy consistent with the programmed privatisation of education and the erosion of workers' rights across all sectors. Unpaid and low-paid labour and navigating between unemployment and under-employment are no longer transitory and characteristic of early academic careers. Instead, for many precarious academics, pay and working conditions are likely to keep deteriorating over time, as many are experiencing. The expressions of chronic stress, anxiety and depression that we have collected reflect real and objective conditions brought by structural changes and they should be formulated as a political demand for change; primarily as a campaign for workers' rights but also as an integral facet of the resistance against neoliberalism. While concrete change in working conditions including better contracts, more pay and benefits are winnable objectives; such goals must be situated in the broader struggle over the restructuring of academic labour brought on through the neoliberalisation of higher education.

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